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ABSTRACT

Family life among the poor has been the subject of many stereotypes, which often focus on the failure of poor families to conform to middleclass structures and muster sympathies for members of one sex at the expense of the other. Chicano migrants' large extended families are often labeled 'stifling', and women's involvement in the lives of their kin is taken as evidence of their conservatism and oppression. That women especially nurture and defer to their husbands leads observers to dichotomize migrants as machos and martyrs; brutish husbands allegedly dominate wives who are suffocated by family life and bound by rural Mexican tradition. But the stark poverty and limited upward mobility of migrants' lives mean that individuals realistically find their greatest security in gathering and binding kin whom they can count on for emotional and economic support. Women, especially, are critical liaisons among kin, working to insure their lifelong involvement in one another's travels and concerns. Marriage is a special case of such kin-work, and three life histories of migrant women reveal the real complexity of their conjugal relations. (Author)

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WHY MIGRANT WOMEN MAKE THEIR HUSBANDS TAMALES

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The tamale is a highly symbolic food item to migrant farmworkers; and as a result of my research in Illinois' migrant camps, I find the tamale significant too. It is a festive and complicated culinary treat, demanding days of preparation, marking special, sometimes sacred, occasions, and signalling the cook's extraordinary concern for the diners. Only women make tamales, often cooperating to do so with domestic fanfare which is not, however, unusual in their everyday lives. The tamale simply exaggerates migrant women's nurturance of their male kin; they appear to be the most oppressed and traditional of females as they virtually monopolize household tasks and staunchly proclaim this to be a natural and appropriate division of labor. That they do so has led many social scientists to describe them as martyred and repressed purveyors of rural Mexican and Christian custom, blindly submissive to their husbands and oblivious to any real world outside the family. By contrast, as fodder for the popular "machismo" stereotype, their husbands are portrayed as excessively masculine, crudely domineering, rude and petty bullies on the domestic scene. (cf. Grebler, Moore, and Guzman, 1970; Madsen, 1973; Padfield and Martin, 1965) I argue in this paper that a proper understanding of migrants' economic and domestic circumstances reveals such stereotypes to be inaccurate.

One hundred and fifty thousand migrant farmworkers are permanent residents of the Texas Rio Grande Valley, a lush and tropical agricultural

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setting. Dominating the landscape are great citrus and truck farms, highly mechanized operations which rely on commuters from across the Mexican border for whatever manual labor they find necessary. Lacking jobs or access to land at home, Chicanos in the valley exit for part of each year to earn a living in the north. Agricultural wages are low and employment is erratic, guaranteeing no income for longer than an hour and offering no fringe benefits in the event of unemployment or disability. (cf. Jones, 1970, 1971; Martinez, 1971; McWilliams, 1942, 1969; North, 1970; Williams, 1975) As a consequence, migrant workers must be very flexible in pursuing work and at the same time forge some sort of security on their own to cushion frequent economic jolts. Extended families, whose members of all ages and both sexes are productive wage earners, are vital to these processes.

Migrant farmworkers find that they must often call on kin for material aid, for housing, and for emotional support. Kin cooperate in field labor and domestic tasks and freely share food, money, time, and space. Because resources are only sporadically avaialble to individuals, counting on kin eases times of scarcity. In turn most persons are sensitive to relatives' requests for aid, recognizing the value of such reciprocity over time.

The problem for social scientists is that migrant families appear both chaotic and suffocating. We prefer that those who consider themselves kin convene for <u>our</u> convenience in a still life world. But migrants lack tidy, bounded domestic groups whose members remain consistently in one place with the same other people. They share mutual long-term concerns with kin despite the frequent necessity that they disperse to work; thus those with significant joint resources and sympathies only

very rarely compose a permanent residential unit. Unable to predict who might be living where, with whom, when, and surprised that in spite of this apparent chaos individuals rarely grasp opportunities at upward mobility which might demand isolating themselves from relatives in need, social scientists often condemn "familism" among migrants as debilitating, confusing, and maladaptive (cf. Coles, 1965, 1970; Grebler, Moore, and Guzman, 1970; Madsen, 1973; and Padfield and Martin, 1965).

I have argued that "familism," rather than stifling individuals, is critical for surviving difficult economic circumstances; that migrants realistically appraise their chances at lone upward mobility as slight and sensibly prefer the security they create by reciprocity over time with kin. But, in addition to appreciating their economic difficulties we must understand that for migrants kinship is something people do -- to offer one another material security, to focus emotional support, and to allow for the flexibility needed to respond to opportunity and to crisis. Kinship is indeed a travelling style, as individuals gather and bind others to steer on in their migrations and in their lives; orchestrating shared concerns, sometimes scattering, but continually recreating obligations and ties among relatives. Thus kinship must be worked at, and among migrants women are those who most vigorously do so. Women's earnings equal men's and women are only rarely economic burdens to their husbands or kinsmen. When they marry, relatives on both sides are involved in the union. Rather than uprooting and isolating husband and wife, marriage joins the relatives of both by widening the circle of kin-like persons individuals can count on. Any conjugal relationship is supported and sustained by many relatives with a stake in it; and in turn any migrant woman works at gathering and binding kin she, her husband, and their

children can depend on as well. Marriages occur early and last for life: among migrant workers the divorce rate is only one percent (cf. Eberstein & Frisbee, 1976; United States Census, 1970). The one divorce I witnessed in central Illinois occurred, significantly, because of a woman's refusal to cook her husband tamales and her tendency to dance with other men at fiestas. Men and women alike agreed that this man was well within his rights to demand a divorce, as she had neglected her duties as a wife.

This, then, is the problem: migrant women are critical to men as cooperating kinswomen -- not only are they economically productive, but they take on the tasks of obligating relatives, vitalizing kin ties, and binding others in cooperation and exchange. Their marriages are supported by a number of relatives concerned with their success and anxious to aid with childcare and material goods. We might expect them to hold high status (cf. Brown, 1970; Sanday, 1973). Why then do they assume all responsibility for housework, appear vulnerable to accusations of negligence otherwise, and insist that the proper role for a wife is that of providing extraordinary comforts for her husband, meeting his needs, accepting his limitations and, generally, caring for him as her primary goal?

It seems to me that women work at binding husbands just as they do other kin. The form such kin-work takes is unique because of the nature of the conjugal relationship. Among migrant workers males and females live in real intimacy, because residential space and emotional concerns are shared so closely among many relatives. Sexuality, however, is tightly circumscribed within each marriage by loading that relationship with mutual jealousy and by husband-wife cooperation in carving out unique modes of reciprocity. Women who may be in fact very independent insist

that they provide their husbands with domestic services and receive in exchange protection and parental-like care. Spouses thus preserve their own relationship as unique and safeguard their disruptive male-female possibilities.

Women, however, do not find in such marriages a refuge from kin or from the real world. In many cases, as the purveyors of kinship, they usurp relations even with many of their husbands' kin. And in the process of securing goods and services for relatives they often cultivate modern middle-class skills (such as negotiating bureaucracies or speaking English) which their husbands lack. Consequently, their high prestige as mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and sisters, is a matter on which all migrants agree, in contrast to a like unanimity on the relative (and opposite) status of husbands and wives. As examples, let us look at the lives of three women whose conjugal relationships appear to be very oppressive and which, without attention to broader domestic contexts, might easily be dismissed as such. Yet the similarities in their biographies are striking, and all three are fairly representative of migrant women.

Gloria Compartida is nearly 70. She became a legal resident of Texas fifty years ago and worked as migrant in Illinois until 1970, while maintaining a permanent home in the Rio Grande Valley. When I first visited her home I was struck by the fact that although she and her husband were its only occupants, the house consisted of eight or ten small, undefined rooms, many of which had been constructed by hand, over many years, as additions to the original dwellings. In response to my demands to know whose room was which, Sra. Compartida was vague, replying that

sometimes her nieces lived here, her godson there, her husband's brother somewhere else. I was slowly and stupidly to discover that this all made sense and that her home offers telling clues to Sra. Compartida's biography.

As the first of her family to immigrate, she has worked for most of her life to persuade the others to join her, and has often untangled complicated bureaucratic procedures to allow them to do so. She has been very successful in this task, managing just two years ago to complete it by arranging for her mother to move to Texas and live with her. Not only were immigration regulations difficult for the mother to bypass, but she also refused to come unless Sra. Compartida agreed to care for her recently orphaned five year old grandniece as well. The Compartidas now care for them both and feel satisfied that the mother will spend her remaining years there. (While child care might seem difficult for a woman of her age, this arrangement is not an unusual one in Sra. Compartida's life. She has cared for at least a dozen children, most of whom were separated from their parents in infancy, and each summer tends her grandson, now six, while her son and his wife work in Illinois.) Her home reveals the flexibility with which Sra. Compartida takes in friends and kin -- as those from Mexico moved north, they found temporary shelter there and still return when in need of housing in the area. As a consequence of working to enable her relatives to join her in Texas, Sra. Compartida has learned English, cultivated rather sophisticated bureaucratic skills, and assembled around her a variety of kin who are obligated to her and sensitive to her needs. Clearly, "familism" is not a conservative, isolating force in her life.

Sra. Compartida's oldest son has settled in Illinois, and, at forty, is attending college while his wife supports their family of seven by operating a day care center. They return to Texas several times a year, sometimes depositing a grandchild or two in Sra. Compartida's care. She visits them often in Illinois as well, occasionally staying for months. While there she insists that her son attend daily mass, much to the amusement of his friends, as he never does so otherwise and is quite critical of the Catholic church. This bright and articulate young man, a leader in the Chicano community, refers to his aged mother as "La Jefa" (the chief), and sputtered on one occasion: "I just can't say no to her." A friend replied, agreeing: "Yeah, that's one thing about us Mexican guys, we always love our mothers." Sra. Compartida once installed a statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe above her son's television set. Upon discovering from one of the children that when she left he had stored it in the garage, she called him long distance to demand that he replace it immediately. And he did. Such calls are frequent, as Sra. Compartida checks on her son's activities and reminds him of his obligations to her and to others of their kin..

Sra. Compartida is indeed very religious. While women's Catholicism is often cited as a conservative force in their lives (cf. Grebler, Moore, and Guzman, 1970; Madsen, 1973; Padfield and Martin, 1965), this is certainly untrue for her. To attend the church of her choice each day, Sra. Compartida must ride three different buses, from which she frequently alights to shop or to visit. She consequently knows and uses the area more creatively than most of its residents. Each Christmas she transforms her home into a manger scene of several hundred pieces which attracts visitors from all over the valley, many of whom bring gifts, stay

to pray and to chat and sometimes become important persons in her network. Each Christmas she also makes 200 dozen holiday tamales for the local taverns, a monumental task requiring the cooperation of kinswomen and friends, which also allows her an entree to the bar scene and annual social contacts among barkeepers useful to a woman searching for her husband or kinsmen.

Sr. Compartida likes tavern life and hangs out there with his friends almost every night. He also likes being cared for by his wife, and she nurtures him as a proper wife. Ten years younger than she is, he speaks no English, has few social ties other than those with male drinking partners, and relies on her to work at keeping the family mobilized. (As one example of her influence, Sra. Compartida discovered a young man in a California orchard one summer "with my husband's face." Convinced that he was her husband's nephew, separated from his parents some twenty years earlier, she brought him home and reincorporated him into the family with much celebration.) A glance at the Compartida household might indicate that he is crudely dominant, she blindly submissive, but this seems to me inaccurate.

Joana Goma is about 45, married, and has two children. When I first met her she had settled temporarily in Illinois, but she is now in Texas, having moved back and forth several times in the five years I have known her. No matter where she is living at the time, Joana stays in close touch with kin, travelling between Texas and Illinois at least once a month, sometimes leaving one of her children there for a time, on other occasions returning with young relatives "so I won't have to be lonesome for them all winter." During the times she lived in Illinois, she could

expect that some two dozen of her relatives would arrive to work there during the migrant season. At those times she visited the camps daily, helping with legal services, public aid, and transportation, and once hauling all her kin she could muster to a meeting of the local migrant council to oust a director she disliked. When her sister-in-law was disabled because her hands were infected by pesticides, Joana saw to it that her own sister assumed all necessary household tasks. Once, when her husband's brother-in-law was evicted from the migrant camp for "disorderly conduct" their entire extended family moved out with him, moving in with Joana until she was able to rouse legal service lawyers to have them reinstated. On another occasion her sister's husband was striken with hepatitis. Joana untangled the proper procedures whereby the local hospital had to assume his medical costs, wheedled money from the local traveler's aid to finance his return to Texas, and secured a state investigation of the camp's drinking water. At another time, her husband's brother, his wife, and their five children descended, penniless, on her, planning to stay for several months. Joana brought her husband's boss to their home in the middle of the night "to see for himself all those little children sleeping on the floor," hoping to persuade him to offer her brother-in-law a job. While the boss stalled, Joana worked at securing public aid for the family. Because this process was so lengthy, she eventually found herself and her kin with no food or money at all, and at this point procured a small loan from each of the local ministers. When the welfare check finally arrived, Joana's father and mother were critically injured in an automobile accident in Texas on the same day. Joana and her children had to travel there immediately, financed by this check. Her father suffered a delirious week, during which, according to Joana, he

called his daughters "bitches and whores," and insisted that all his kin cooperate in killing great imaginary insects he saw in his room. Joana insisted that everyone humor him, and, after he died, framed and distributed photographs of her and her father dancing, so "they'd remember him like he really was." Clearly, her resources in kin ties are considerable, and they serve her well; as a pivotal kinswoman she works hard at kinship.

Joana vigorously stretches and strengthens a network she can count on for her and her kin. She was the only person I knew who was able to cash large checks at a local gas station, and in return she insisted that her relatives purchase their gas there. When a law student she knew faced the bar exams, she lit a candle for him and prayed to the Virgin of Guadalupe. When he passed, she took full credit for his success, and insisted that thereafter he offer legal services whenever members of her extended family needed them. Upon meeting me, concerned that I had no visible family, she overwhelmed me with taco dinners, telephone calls, and visits (once with a collection of color glossy photos from her father's funeral). After a trip to Texas she once returned with three used bridesmaid's dresses, collected from various of her cousins, worried that "you don't dress pretty." In return she grew to count on me for a variety of services, ranging from tutoring her son, to helping her husband secure his high school equivalency degree, to finding furniture for her kin, to lending them money.

In her marriage, Joana again takes charge of cooking and shopping and cleaning and defers to her husband as the chief. They talk frequently of sexual concerns -- he, threatening to "run off with a little mojadita" she responding that she'll throw him out to cook for himself or countering with stories of her doctor "playing with my legs, right in front of Pedro."

Their marriage is a rich and close one, encircled by many kin with a stake in it. Once again, surface appearances are misleading.

Dolores Abierta is a young and articulate woman with whom I became quite close. Because in many ways we were very similar, I expected that her marriage would differ radically from those of older women. Yet her husband would not allow her to swin in areas where other men might see her in a bathing suit or walk in town alone -- on many occasions when she and I went into town together he circled the streets in his pick-up truck to keep an eye on her. Appalled at such supervision, I was surprised to learn that Dolores found it flattering. The conjugal limits which seemed to me to be archaic and restrictive were significant in emphasizing to her that her husband loved her. She felt too that his conduct saved her from bothersome pre-marital harrassment, in particular from her brother-in-law's cousin, "who used to always come into by bedroom and bother me. Now he leaves me alone." Thus potentially disruptive concerns among their kin are focused between husband and wife.

Dolores' husband's intimate concerns include knowing the precise date on which she should begin to menstruate, and if she doesn't, he "pushes on my stomach to help me." When her sister died, he energetically devised distractions for Dolores, "so I wouldn't think. He just kept jabbering at me all night and made me watch horror movies on TV." Especially concerned about her uncle at this time "who raised her (the sister) like his own," and unable to travel to Texas because of illness, Dolores dispatched her husband and two of her brothers to Texas over one long weekend. They returned with this uncle, her brother-in-law, and five nieces and nephews, all of whom moved in with Dolores. Soon after, Dolores herself

was hospitalized for a few days; during this time her husband never left her room, staying to oversee her care and to reassure her. When she returned home, he attempted to cook for her, but she disliked feeling helpless and "got bored watching him work like that." Her husband's mother arranged to switch rooms with another family so that she might be next door to Dolores, and her husband's brother gave her their family car. (Dolores subsequently passed this same car on to her youngest brother: "I figured, he was just back from Nam and all and I didn't need it any more.")

While her husband was concerned that her illness might be taken by others as evidence that he was not a good provider, Dolores takes great pride in his twenty-five pound weight gain since their wedding: "When we got married, he was skinny and I was fat. Now it's the other way around." Thus, the health and well-being of each is taken as the proper measure of marital reciprocity. While she cares for him and respects his limits, she receives a substantial support from his relatives and a unique form of nurturance from him, only possible within a relationship couched in a sexual idiom. She tried again and again to explain this to me: A wife must obey her husband, cook his meals, respond to his sexual overtures, and clean his house. And, "whenever I feel sad, he rocks me on his lap and lets me cry like a baby." She also made it clear to me that I was not to involve myself with any of her brothers. She felt that I would not make a good wife, because I had no understanding of the duties appropriate for wives. She policed her brothers accordingly, searching for preferable spouses for the bachelors and lecturing the married ones for the smallest infractions. No one saw any contradiction between her legitimate authority as a sister and her supposed docility as a wife.

Dolores' marriage, like many others among migrant workers, does not simply juxtapose raw machismo against saintly submission. Both men and women actively construct complementary domestic roles, provide special care for one another, and accentuate, to secure, the conjugal tie. This tie is crucial, as are many ties, in enabling individuals to counter the ever-present hazards and meager returns of farm labor. Individuals must work at gathering and binding kin to follow, reap, and share the harvest, remaining alert to agricultural rhythms, and wagering periods of productivity against times when they expect to be in need. Women, especially, work at reaffirming the involvement of their kin in one another's lives, through cultivating their own marriages, through vigorously constructing ties with their husband's kin, and through assembling relatives on both sides to convoy the life course, knowing that life, like the harvest, proceeds through periods of growth and relative abundance, decline and decay. A woman is thus many kinds of kinswomen at once; and the role she creates as wife complements those of sister, mother, and grandmother in allowing her to gather, nurture, and bind relatives for rainy days and hard times. To segregate these roles and focus, for example, on what kind of a wife she is, is unrealistic and misleading, for life is not like that. We must instead examine the economic situation to which kinship is addressed, and appreciate the bustling domestic world as migrants construct and perceive it to understand male-female relations and to untangle simplistic stereotypes about men's and women's lives.

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